

a new
continent of
thought



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An Outline of the Ageless Wisdom

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This publication is written in order to explore some of the major reasons for the formation of the Theosophical Society in 1875, and to assess the extent to which the Society has succeeded in implementing those objectives.

The most fundamental reason for the Society's foundation is to be found in a passage in "The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett" which outlines the Adepts' work for humanity thus:

'And we will go on in that periodical work of ours; we will not allow ourselves to be baffled in our philanthropic attempts until that day when the foundations of a new continent of thought are so firmly built that no amount of opposition and ignorant malice guided by the Brethren of the Shadow will be found to prevail'. (Letter No. 9).

The magnitude of the task is awe-inspiring. The work does not by any means fall on the Theosophical Society exclusively, but nevertheless we have been invited to join the Adepts in this 'periodical work'. If our mission is to help in the building of these foundations, we should be aware of the implications of the task, and the tools with

which we must work. The first and most fundamental implication of 'a new continent of thought' is that the foundations must be laid in each of us. It is we, humanity, who are the thinkers. Collectively we create the great tides of thought which influence science, religion and philosophy. The keynote of a culture, of a civilization, is nothing more than the sum total of all individual thinkers. Our task, then, is no less than turning men's minds towards spirituality. In the present climate of crass materialism such ideas are, to many, quite literally unthinkable. It is this tide that we must turn.

What are the tools we must use for this task? What are the building blocks for our foundations? Surely they are the basic philosophical teachings which the true Founders of the Theosophical Society worked so hard to establish. But a tool is a means to an end. When the job is completed the tools are laid aside. The study of philosophy is likewise a means to an end, not a goal in itself. The teachings were not given in order to add to the tangled mass of philosophical speculation, as one Adept expressed it, nor to found a new school for occultism, but rather to benefit the majority of mankind. The end which such study must subserve is that of 'enlightening superstitious man', as the same letter says.

The teachings that we have been given are

a re-statement of the Ageless Wisdom. Clearly it is not that Wisdom in its entirety, for words could never express it. But it is a faithful echo of the truth in that all the major principles have been outlined for us. It is in questions of detail that our knowledge is incomplete. Those principles can be grouped together under four major headings. No doubt each can be divided and sub-divided until the mind begins to reel with the complexity, but the major principles are so clear that most men can grasp them.

The first is the principle of Unity. It states that all existence is one thing, that all lives are facets of One Life, that Reality is a single all-embracing Truth. From this stems the fundamental idea that brotherhood is a fact in Nature, not merely a pious hope.

The second is the principle of Law. Nature is uniform in her operations, and every process can be described in terms of the various laws of nature. These apply to all realms, physical, as well as spiritual. The law which appears to have the greatest relevance for man is that of karma, the law of ethical causation.

The third is the principle of Cyclic Evolution. This imparts meaning and purpose to life. It provides the framework with which to understand the relationship of one kingdom of nature to another, and more

particularly the pilgrimage that man is engaged upon.

The fourth major principle is that of man himself. The information given on the constitution of man provides the key to all questions of psychology, and also an understanding of man's spiritual aspirations and heritage.

If these are the tools, how have they been applied in the past, and how should we be using them now?

The Original Mission of the Society

It is possible to identify three major areas in which the Theosophical Society was directly involved in the early days. The first was Spiritualism. In the latter part of the last century the subject of spiritualism was one which was at the forefront of the public consciousness. All of this new-found interest in Spiritualism was regarded by the Adepts as highly dangerous. The effects of seances, of materializations and the like are often harmful. The pursuit of psychic phenomena for their own sake, not for the knowledge towards which they might lead, was regarded as another phase of materialism. The Theosophical Society, by means of *Isis Unveiled* and a series of articles by H.P. Blavatsky, was intended to inject the philosophical rationale of these psychic phenomena. In *Isis Unveiled* a three-fold constitution of man—body, soul

and spirit-was introduced in order to show that not all seance-room phenomena were produced by the real beings of those who had just died, but rather by their astral remains, their psychic corpses.

The second major topic the Theosophical Society had to counter was that of Darwinian evolution. Again it is necessary to realize the revolutionary effects that Darwin's ideas had produced in the scientific community. A comprehensive view of man's origins had been produced which seemed viable, but ran counter to the orthodox explanations as offered by Christianity. Again, the Adepts viewed this trend in the biological sciences with deep misgivings because of the materialistic view of man that such ideas would foster. It appeared to deny to man any spiritual origin or destiny. The implications of these ideas on morality were potentially disastrous. Thus it was also the task of the early workers in the Theosophical Society to establish a credible alternative explanation for man's origin which would reinstate his inherent spiritual nature as a significant factor.

The third major area of concern was that of religious dogmatism and the dead-letter interpretation of the various world scriptures. The attack on this was a more general task, but no less important for all that. The Adepts' views on the pernicious effects that religion has had are clearly stated in *Letter*

10 in *The Mahatma Letters* to A.P. Sinnett. Two thirds of the evils that beset mankind are attributed to that factor alone. More particularly they say 'it is the sacerdotal caste, the priesthood and the churches; it is in those illusions that man looks upon as sacred, that he has to search out the source of that multitude of evils which is the great curse of humanity and that almost overwhelms mankind'. Again, much of the literary work carried out by the early workers was aimed at this area in an attempt to point out the fallacies and to re-interpret the scriptures.

Has the Society Succeeded?

Have we achieved any of these goals? This is a very difficult question to answer accurately. It is clear that we have not succeeded completely, nor have we failed totally, but just what has been done? As far as Spiritualism is concerned, it is no longer the burning issue that it was. An improvement has occurred, and to some degree theosophical thought, directly or indirectly, has played a part.

In the second area, that of Darwinian evolution, and more generally scientific materialism, less would appear to have been achieved. If anything, these ideas have gained ground. There are those who would argue that the physical sciences have undergone a radical change since the end of the last century, especially in physics. These

changes, they say, bring science that much closer to Theosophy. While this is undoubtedly true, science still refuses to recognize any causation outside of the purely physical realms. It still seeks to explain all phenomena in terms of purely physical forces and energies. Although research into areas such as E.S.P. and parapsychology is now to some extent 'respectable', no real advance has been made. Nor will any progress be made until science concedes that the causation of these psychic events and processes lies outside the physical realm, and that all that is seen is the resultant effect on this plane. More specifically, Darwin's ideas, however modified, are still accepted as the bases of human evolution.

More recently the Theosophical Society, through the Theosophical Research Centre, has attempted to show the weaknesses of Darwin's idea, and to offer the basis of an alternative one, using the scientists' own language. The book *Intelligence Came First* is well argued and scientifically sound, but has it had, or will it have the desired effect?

As to the question of religious dogmatism, it is nearly impossible to assess what change has taken place in a short essay.

In some areas its hold appears to have weakened. The decline of organized religion, particularly Christianity, in the West, is an instance. But on the other hand

the Islamic religion appears to be gaining ground in the Middle East. Furthermore, the enormous upheavals taking place in the Buddhist world are very significant. The exodus from Tibet and, more recently, the persecution of Buddhists in South-East Asia have produced drastic changes, perhaps ultimately for the better. The growth in the West of interest in other world religions and in other smaller spiritually based movements is important. In this latter area we can claim some credit at least, but despite appearances religious dogmatism is still a powerful factor in human behaviour.

In attempting to assess the impact of Theosophy in the areas mentioned previously, we should remember that, in an adept's words, we should aim to 'arrest the attention of the highest minds' and 'guide the crest-wave of intellectual advancement into spirituality.' Though we can list a number of major figures who have been influenced by theosophical thought, it is doubtful if anyone would now claim that we had succeeded in the terms of the last-mentioned quotations.

The Weaknesses of Human Nature

If this analysis is moderately correct so far, if the Theosophical Society has not had the impact that it might have had, the inevitable question is—Why not? What is it that holds us back from laying those foundations mentioned in the initial quotation? The answer lies in the present condition of

humanity, and that includes us, the members of the Theosophical Society. This condition is clearly stated in 'The Mahatma letters to A. P. Sinnett,' Letter I.

'As for human nature in general, it is the same now as it was a million years ago. Prejudice based on selfishness; a general unwillingness to give up an established order of things for new modes of life and thought—and occult study requires all that and much more—; pride and stubborn resistance to Truth if it but upsets their previous notion of things, such are the characteristics of your age . . .'

Let us examine this statement more closely. 'Prejudice based on selfishness' is the first phrase. It is not difficult to see the application of this in our society. Wherever there is a vested interest there is selfishness. It is true of business monopolies; true of closed shop trade unionism; true of party politics for their own sake and not that of the country. Self-interest generates prejudice, the ability to see only that side of the question that suits us. It is easy to apply this phrase to others, but how sure are we that it does not apply to us?

The second phrase is 'a general unwillingness to give up an established order of things for new modes of thought and life . . .'. Call it by what name we will, this is inertia, laziness and resistance to change. To resist change is to resist life

itself. Perhaps we feel that having made the effort, having found and adopted Theosophy, we have made the necessary change. However, a moment's thought will show that this is but the first step. We must continue to question our principles, and continue to refine our attitudes and understanding.

The third phrase, 'pride and stubborn resistance to Truth . . .' is possibly still more important. It is so easy for our ideas to crystallize from supposition into certainty, and from certainty into dogma. When our beliefs become non-rational we seem to defend them most fiercely. Two factors are central here. First, in achieving any new position in the realm of science or philosophy there is a sense of satisfaction. This is legitimate. But where it is tinged with a competitive edge, satisfaction turns to pride and the position must be defended. From this defence stems the second factor, that in defending a position we are affirming that position more and more strongly. It will cost us more to move from it. Hence the 'stubborn resistance'. Ideally all views are to be held lightly, so that a change of view can be accomplished with relative ease. Unfortunately the deeper the prejudice lies, the more invincible it becomes.

The Curse of Materialism

If one word more than any other appears to sum up our failure to build these founda-

tions, then that word is Materialism. The whole of Western civilization is based on it. It runs so deep that few of us stop to question it. We have lived in its shadow, we have been brought up with its presuppositions, until we are unwilling even to acknowledge its existence. How long do we in the West think that we can continue to expect a standard of living that could never be achieved on a global scale? How long do we think we can continue to consume irreplaceable resources like fossil fuels and minerals before they run out? How long will we be committed to growth economies that cannot continue growing forever?

At the personal level, in terms of our material existence, selfishness manifests as desire for possessions, and the more we have, the more we want. In our emotional lives selfishness appears as self-gratification without concern for other people except in so far as they are instrumental in helping us to our goal. The fact that such an attitude tends to isolate us from others and ultimately leads to loneliness and pain is ignored. Was there ever such an age for psychological ailments as ours? The effect of selfishness in the realm of the mind and ideas is founded on the above. Materialism in science appears under a slightly different guise, but leads ultimately to the same end. In science, the basis for all knowledge is observation. Objectivity in observation is the goal. Ideally the observer

should in no way colour that which he observes. These factors lead to the view that there is an externally constituted universe 'out there' which exists independently of the observer. In detaching the observer from nature, implicitly science takes no responsibility for what it reports. This line of thinking culminates in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Materialism has gradually crept into Western philosophy. In the days of Aristotle and Plato philosophers addressed themselves to questions concerning the whole human condition—ethics, aesthetics, epistemology, ontology, metaphysics, even science. But Descartes started a trend of scepticism which has culminated in logical positivism and linguistic philosophy. Instead of asking what it is good to do, as the Greeks did, philosophers now inquire into the meaning of the word 'good' and analyse what other men have said on the subject. This attitude seems to remove from the philosophers the basic contact with ordinary men and women that is essential for real meaningful philosophy. Perhaps this analysis seems too facile, but consider this: in Greece philosophy was a matter for public debate, whereas now it is a matter for academic scholarship.

The science and philosophy of any culture are derived ultimately from the underlying trend of the thinkers in that culture. In

ours today both science and philosophy appear to have become a-moral in their attitudes. Both appear to sidestep the question of ethics. The broad concern for humanity and its welfare is lacking. Contrast this with the attitude of the Adepts in this passage:

‘Now for us, poor unknown philanthropists, no fact of either of these sciences (physical and metaphysical, A.W.) is interesting except in the degree of its potentiality of moral results, and in the ratio of its usefulness to mankind.’

The question we must ask ourselves as Theosophists is this: Have we adopted a similar attitude towards Theosophy? Have we failed to see Theosophy in terms of its potential ‘moral result and its usefulness to mankind’?

The Moral Implications of Theosophy

Perhaps we should reconsider the four principles outlined earlier, and see what the moral implications are. And let us remember that these principles will only have a moral effect if they are in the consciousness of many people. Our mission, has to be seen in these terms: we must dismiss the idea that Theosophy is for the few, and we must use the knowledge entrusted to us by disseminating it as widely as we can.

Man's Inner Nature

Turning to the four principles themselves, the first to re-examine is that of Man. The information on the constitution of Man has enormous practical significance. It indicates the root of selfishness in man; it shows how these qualities developed and how necessary they were at a certain stage in evolution. It further shows what we have wherewith to control these lower elements of our nature. Two-and-a-half-thousand years ago the Buddha used an analogy of a man with an arrow in his side to suggest man with his lower nature dominant. The Buddha said, at that time, that the man's concern should be to withdraw the arrow as quickly as possible, rather than to wonder who made it and how it came to be in his side! However, such is the materialism of our age that it seems that until we know all about the 'arrow', we will not make the effort to withdraw it. Theosophy provides this information, and provides it in detail.

The Fundamental Unity of All Existence

The next principle to study is that of unity. Again, the practical implications are far-reaching. Unity as a principle applies at many levels, not just that of the Absolute Reality or that of the One Life. Closer to home, it applies in the realms of thought and

feeling. Firstly, an understanding of psychic faculties shows that we do not live in isolation. We are all influenced by each others' immediate thoughts and feelings, for good or ill. This alone would be enough to justify 'mental hygiene': However, unity runs deeper than this. Every thought leaves a permanent impress in the psychic world, and these records are not just passive photographs, but living forces which react on their creator, man. At a still deeper level, there is unity of thought in that we can only think those thoughts which are within the Universal Mind. We are not the originators of new thoughts, only the medium for bringing into existence pre-existing potentialities.

None of this need seem distant from us. All of the above can be realized even with the limited faculties at our command. Who among us has never experienced the effects of telepathy? Who has never realized what a friend is about to say seconds before he says it? For most of us, this faculty is an unconscious one and is probably the basis for psychic hunches and the like. As to the effect of the past, again who has not felt the 'atmosphere' of a building in which something special has occurred? In such places the impressions are so strong that they force themselves into our waking conscious minds. But at other times they merely act on us at a sub-conscious level. The responsibility that all this implies is enormous.

At a deeper level altogether, there is a fundamental spiritual fact that humanity is one whole. *Light on the Path* calls it 'that united spirit of life which is your only true self'. The same idea has been expressed as a dialogue between master and pupil, where the pupil asks about other people and our duty towards them. The master replies 'when you understand Self, there are no others.' This is the level at which brotherhood is a reality, not just a mental concept. It is towards such an understanding that we must strive.

Universal Law

The next principle is that of Law. There are two major implications of law which certainly have moral significance for us. The first concerns the nature of law itself. Law tends to have a mechanical implication for many of us, but this is only because we use as examples physical laws. But H.P.B. used the words 'wisely, intelligently and justly' to describe their mode of operation. Ultimately laws are the expression of intelligent beings, the architects and builders of our worlds. As laws emanate from intelligent beings, it is not unreasonable to expect this quality of intelligence to pervade their action. The implication for us is that everything is as it should be. We all are aware that much in the world today is far from what we think it should be, and it is certainly our duty to do all that we can to relieve suffering. But deeper than this

there is an insight, that, as one mystic has put it, 'it's all right!' To sit and wring our hands at our impotence to help suffering mankind is futile. If there is nothing we can do to help in physical terms, the very least we can do is to adopt a constructive attitude towards the situation. One is forcefully reminded here of the dialogue between master and pupil which runs: 'Master, what can I do to help humanity?' To which the master replies: 'Well, what *can* you do?'

The second major implication of law as it applies in the human sphere is that of ethical causation or karma. As it is expressed in *The Idyll of the White Lotus*, 'Each man is his own absolute law giver, the dispenser of glory or gloom to himself; the decreer of his life, his reward, his punishment.' This of course has the most profound moral implications. Man is much more than the self-conscious personality with which we identify ourselves. It is within the totality of what man is that this process of self-regulation takes place. It is as if a child should wander into a kitchen and start playing with what he finds. He may cut or burn himself through ignorance, but it is not the kitchen which 'punishes' him. It is his own actions which precipitate the unpleasant effects. So with personal man, the sooner mankind is made aware of this, the sooner mankind will stop trying to blame external agencies for all the ills that befall it. As a Stoic once said, 'If any man be unhappy, let him know that it is by

reason of himself alone.'

Again, for the man who will not pull out the arrow until he knows who made it, Theosophy provides some detailed information on the operation of karmic law within the human sphere. It is not arbitrary, but on the contrary intelligible. However, in the long run all that this detailed knowledge will do is to satisfy one's personal curiosity. The impetus to extract the arrow must come from a deeper level of being. From this level a man generates no further personal karma.

The Spiritual Journey of Man

The final principle is that of Cyclic Evolution. Theosophy contains so much information on cycles large and small, rounds, races and planetary chains, that many minds boggle at the prospect of coming to terms with this area at all. The mistake that we all tend to make is to regard all this information as history, and hence to question its relevance to our immediate condition.

The fundamental relevance of this area is that it imparts a sense of purpose, of direction to man's efforts. It answers the questions 'What is it all for? Why should we make the effort to change?' This latter question is one of the most difficult to deal with. The answer can be sought on two different levels, the personal and the im-

personal Both are significant, but they differ greatly in emphasis. For most of us, operating at a personal level, a mental answer is what is immediately required. Mystical answers can wait! The information we have been given tells of the nature of cycles. We are involved in cycles in our lives at a number of levels. Whether we consider bio-rhythms or astrological cycles or the phases of each life, we are bound up in cycles for better or for worse. If we can grasp the fundamental nature of *one* cycle, we will have grasped them all. This is the relevance. In studying cycles 'writ large' we learn the principles which we can then apply to our daily lives.

To understand something of the overall way in which humanity is evolving, something of its past and something of its future, gives us a perspective which helps to put our immediate concerns into a rational proportion. If we understood more clearly the rise and fall of cycles, we would better appreciate the rise and fall of civilizations and cultures.

The work of the Theosophical Society has, it is suggested, to be seen in these terms. Our task is to help build the foundations of a new continent of thought, with all the implications for moral and ethical results that such work implies, so that we do not, in H.P. Blavatsky's words, 'drift off onto some sand bank of thought or another, and there remain a stranded carcass to moulder and die.'

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